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The
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THE EUROPEAN RECONQUEST OF NORTH AFRICA¹

THE region we commonly call North Africa, using this designation in its narrowest sense, comprises the territories of Morocco, Algeria, Tunis, and Tripoli. In almost every respect it is clearly separated from the rest of the huge continent of which it forms a part. Geographically, it is cut off from the Sudan by the Sahara, a greater obstacle to communication than the broadest ocean. Ethnographically, it is the home of a Mediterranean people and not of the typical African race, the negro, who is represented here only by some scattered descendants of slaves, brought in, like those of our own South, against their wills, and less numerous in proportion to the rest of the population than is the case in the United States. Historically, Africa Minor, as some call it, has been in its economic and political relations, in its culture, and in its civilization, at times a part of Asia, at times a part of Europe, but never to more than a slight extent a real portion of its own continent. Its influence has indeed penetrated to the south, but in return it has received little more than the products of a scarce, though long-continued, caravan trade, mostly in human flesh, taking months to crawl painfully across the scorched wastes of the desert. Even with the valley of the Nile it is connected by sea rather than by land, for east of Tunis the Sahara advances to the very waters of the Mediterranean, forming in spite of its scattered oases a barrier which has been crossed by but few armies and by only one considerable migration² in the last three thousand and more years.

The chief structural features of Africa Minor are simple. The territory consists of a long strip of land bounded on the north by

¹ Paper read at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, December, 1911.

² That of two large Arab tribes, the Hilal and the Solaim, in the eleventh century.

the Mediterranean, on the south by the Sahara, on the east by the Gulf of Tripoli and the Libyan Desert, on the west by the Atlantic. From the Straits of Gibraltar almost to the Gulf of Carthage the mountains continually skirt the sea, rising sharply from it in their western portion, the Rif, but gradually becoming lower and less severe as they proceed eastward. They are intersected by river valleys which form lands suitable for cultivation and settlement and also offer the means, but not always easy means, of communication with the interior. Ordinarily a sharp ascent leads from the coast to the high inland plateaus. The plateaus are terminated on the south by another range of mountains from which there is a sudden descent to the desert. North Africa thus consists of three main regions—first, the littoral or Tell with its slopes and valleys, numerous disconnected sea-ports, a sedentary population and south European climate and products; second, the plateaus, with greater extremes of temperature and scanty rainfall, a region suitable to pastoral rather than to agricultural life, with a population as yet largely nomadic; and third, the torrid Sahara, a waste of stone and sand, stretching indefinitely to the southward, for the most part uninhabitable, but dotted here and there with oases. This threefold division is most plainly marked in Algeria. In Tunis the mountains are lower, the transitions are less sudden, and there is sea on two sides. Accordingly the country is more open and accessible, and is in natural, easy communication with Sicily and Italy. Tripoli is nineteen-twentieths desert except in the peninsula of Cyrenaica. In Morocco the wild mountains of the Rif that have long proved an effective barrier against the advance of Spain are nevertheless, nothing but an offshoot. The true ranges of the Atlas here run to the southwest till they meet the ocean, enclosing between them and the Rif a territory which looks not to the Mediterranean but to the Atlantic. This explains why Morocco has not been pre-eminently a Mediterranean state. Only a part of it was ever occupied by the Romans, and the whole proved beyond reach of the Turks. Morocco until lately has had little to do with any European country outside of the Spanish peninsula, and in the hour of its weakness in the sixteenth century it was threatened by Portugal rather than by Castile. On the other hand it has more than once drawn fresh strength from the desert tribes dwelling to the south of it,³ and for a moment its dominion was acknowledged on the banks of the Niger.⁴

The recorded history of North Africa begins with its coloniza-

³ The Almoravides came from the region of the Senegal.

⁴ Timbuktu was captured by a Moroccan army in 1591.

tion by an Asiatic people, the Phoenicians, whose earliest settlements there appear to have been made somewhat less than a thousand years before the Christian era. Carthage, the most important of them, was founded not far from 800 B. C., and from that time for some six and a half centuries the history and civilization of Africa Minor may fairly be regarded as Asiatic. From the frontier of the Greek territory in Cyrene to beyond the Straits, the whole coast, besides much of the interior, was under the sway of the great Tyrian colony with its sanguinary Oriental gods and its Semitic talent for mercantile enterprise.

The Third Punic War marks the end of this first period of Asiatic rule although the Punic language did not disappear for many generations. As late as the time of the emperor Septimius Severus it was the native tongue of the district in which he was born. North Africa gradually passed under Roman domination, but we may date the new epoch in its culture as beginning with the refounding of Carthage by Julius Caesar. Thenceforth the region was in reality a part of Europe and remained so for seven hundred more years. The provinces of Africa, Numidia, and the Mauretanias were integral portions of the empire, partaking in the common life and civilization and contributing their quota of celebrated men to the glory of Rome. St. Augustine, the greatest of all Latin church fathers, was born in the present Algerian department of Constantine.⁵ So little were these provinces regarded as forming a territory unto themselves that they were later distributed between the prefectures of Italy and of Gaul. It is true that in the rural districts the mass of the people, like those in Britain, were never Latinized, and that the Berbers of the mountain and desert remained as independent as did the Picts and Scots, and like them grew increasingly troublesome in the days when the strength of the empire had decayed. But the land was studded with prosperous towns whose ruins attest to the splendor which was once theirs. The amphitheatre that still looms up near the village of el Djem in Tunis is larger than that at Pompeii or at Arles. To all intents and purposes Roman Carthage was long the second city in western Europe.⁶

For a brief space North Africa came under a new foreign master when, like the rest of the Western Empire, it was overrun by German barbarians. But the rule of the Vandals was short, leaving no traces behind it except that it accelerated the process

⁵ The emperor Macrinus was a Berber.

⁶ Herodian (VII. 6, 21) calls it second in the empire only to Rome, and the rival of Alexandria. Ausonius in his *Ordo Nobilium Urbium* (XI. 2 and 3) puts Rome first and Carthage and Constantinople in the second place.

that had already set in of decay of the civilized portion of the community and of recrudescence of strength on the part of the untamed Berber tribes.

In the latter part of the seventh century there burst a storm from the east that swept all before it. An Asiatic people new to history, the Mohammedan Arabs, in the first fervor of their conquering zeal, made their way across from Egypt, subduing, though not without struggles, Romans and Berbers alike, till within a generation they had penetrated to the Atlantic and across the Straits into Spain. Their own numbers were few, but their creed was speedily accepted by their new subjects who hastened to enroll themselves under the banner of militant Islam. Then for a second time North Africa became Asiatic. The Latin tongue and culture vanished from the land as completely as had the Phoenician. Its place was taken by Arabic and though the Berbers, thanks to superior numbers, soon reasserted themselves politically, for them, too, Arabic has ever since been the language of religion and of law, of learning and of civilization. From about the beginning of the eighth century until the year 1830, and in a measure until the present day, North Africa under Arab, Berber, and Turk, in its life and its thought has formed a part of Mohammedan Asia. The medieval universities of Fez and of Samarkand, despite the two thousand miles between them, were as fundamentally alike as were those of Oxford and Paris.

On the fourteenth of June, 1830, when the French army landed at Sidi Ferruch near Algiers, a new period of North African history dawned. The process of European reconquest had begun, yet this process, considering the greatly accelerated pace of events in our day, has till recently been slow, slower indeed than was the advance of the Arabs twelve hundred years ago. The first step, the subjugation of Algeria, took more than a quarter of a century to complete; the last ones, the partition of Morocco and the conquest of Tripoli, are being carried out at the present time. Now within a few years, perhaps even months, the whole of Africa Minor will have come, at least nominally, once more under European rule.

As we muse over these latest transformations, we wonder not so much that they have occurred as that they did not occur centuries earlier. Why did such weak, barbarous states, lying closer to many parts of Europe than these do to each other, remain so long unconquered, when the vast and remote empires of the Incas and of the Moghuls had for generations been in European hands? It is true that in the Middle Ages North Africa was usually more

than able to repel attack. The great empires of the Omeiads, the Abbasids, the Fatimites, the Almoravides, and the Almohades, and even of some of the minor dynasties, were on the offensive, not the defensive, as regards Christendom, and as late as the thirteenth century more than once threatened the reconquest of Spain. But by the end of the fourteenth, the Mohammedan world of North Africa, like that of Spain, had lost its vigor. It was nominally split up into three effete kingdoms,⁷ not one of them even as strong as that of Granada. In reality most of the country was in a state of tribal anarchy. And now the Christians literally began to carry the war into Africa. The Portugal of John II. and Emanuel and the Spain of Isabella and Ximenes, not satisfied with dividing the unexplored regions of the new world, also agreed on a line of delimitation in the nearer field of African conquest.⁸ Here both Christian states for a time met with brilliant success. By the year 1513 the Portuguese had possessed themselves not only of Ceuta and Tangier in the north but likewise of almost all the west coast of Morocco as far as the edge of the desert, and their influence extended into the interior where they had native chiefs in their employ. At the same date the Spaniards had made even greater progress along the southern shore of the Mediterranean. Oran, Algiers, Bougie, Tunis, and in fact nearly the whole shore as far as Tripoli, was in their hands or recognized their supremacy, as did the interior kingdom of Tlemçen. Weak and distracted, Mohammedan North Africa seemed destined to speedy subjugation.

But by the close of the sixteenth century we have a different picture. King Sebastian of Portugal with his army had been destroyed at Kasr el Kebir⁹ and, one after another, the African posts of Portugal on the Atlantic had fallen into the hands of the enemy or had been abandoned. Spain on her part had fared little better, for she had lost everything east of Oran, and her few remaining African possessions were confined to the coast and subject to constant attack.

The usual explanation given for these changes of fortune is the revival of militant Islam under the new Saadian dynasty in Morocco and the intervention of the Turks at Algiers and elsewhere. This explanation may be correct as far as it goes, but it is manifestly inadequate. We may perhaps admit that Portugal was too weak a state to hold her African conquests against a rejuvenated Morocco. It is also true that Charles V., who made two great

⁷ Tunis, Tlemçen, Fez.

⁸ In 1509.

⁹ In 1578.

North African expeditions, a successful one against Tunis, an unsuccessful one against Algiers, had none the less by the end of his reign lost the control of the Mediterranean, which had passed to the Ottoman fleet. But after Lepanto and the decay of Turkish power, Philip II., had he so wished, was in a position to re-establish, consolidate, and extend Spanish rule south of the Mediterranean, following the last behests of Queen Isabella. The armies that under such leaders as Don John and Parma fought so long and obstinately against the insurgent Dutch, that threatened the independence of England, and that actually occupied Paris, were more than sufficient to overcome the resistance of a handful of Turkish Janizaries, or of Berber chieftains, or of Moroccan sultans. The real strength of the Barbary States was indeed far inferior to what Europe supposed it to be, and their reputation was mostly due to the scandalous immunity they enjoyed for generations. Had Philip II. and his successors pursued a different policy, North Africa might well be a great Spanish territory to-day and Spain still one of the first of European powers. Now that she is striving to obtain a mere fraction of what might once have been hers, Spaniards complain bitterly that the negligence and folly of their forefathers have deprived them of their birthright.

But in the second half of the sixteenth century they had fixed their eyes elsewhere. They were absorbed by the task of conquering and exploiting their immense territories in the New World, which attracted their most adventurous spirits and which promised untold wealth. They were also intent on preserving at any cost their predominance in Europe, for which they poured out blood and treasure without stint, leaving them with scant attention or resources to spare for African enterprises, however near home. Africa offered nothing to tempt them, no mines of gold and silver, no possibility of rich tropical cultures with slave labor, no primitive pagans, whose souls their ardent missionaries might save, no real glory to be won or immediate increase of power and prestige in Europe. Instead there was a country whose jagged coast was difficult to hold, a land that grew ever worse as one penetrated into the interior, a warlike population animated by intense and ineradicable hatred of all Christians and especially of their hereditary enemies, the Spaniards. We need hardly wonder, then, that Spain paid small heed to the feeble garrisons which she still kept isolated as a matter of pride in her few remaining posts, often unpaid, short of food, and continually harassed by indefatigable enemies. In 1792 she actually abandoned Oran, her most important African presidio, though she had owned it almost as long as she did Mexico

or Lima, and longer than the English have held Gibraltar. To-day she regrets it, now that Oran is a flourishing city of well over one hundred thousand inhabitants, many of them Spaniards, but alas! under the French flag.

Spain, however, was not the only state that in those days failed to recognize the value of North African possessions. France remained equally indifferent and confined herself to occasional chastisement of the Barbary pirates and to maintaining a precarious trading-post at the port of La Calle. Louis XIV. repeatedly sent his fleets to bombard Algiers and other piratical dens, but he made only one futile attempt to get a permanent foothold.¹⁰ The conduct of England, judged by our present lights, was yet more extraordinary. She retained, wisely enough, of the dowry of Catherine of Braganza, the far-distant port of Bombay but, after an occupation of twenty-two years, she abandoned to the Moors Tangier at the very mouth of the Mediterranean. Sixteen years later the English captured Gibraltar from the Spaniards and have held it ever since, yet strange to say they have never tried to tighten their grip on the Straits by seizing Ceuta or the other presidios in Morocco, easy as this would have been for them on several occasions. They, too, suffered from the Barbary pirates, if less than did some others, and even the punitive expedition of Lord Exmouth in 1816 resulted in only one more bombardment.

In the years immediately following 1815 the naval, commercial, and colonial supremacy of Great Britain all over the world was more overwhelming than it had ever been before in her history, or indeed than it has been since. In the Mediterranean, where she carried on a flourishing trade, Gibraltar, Malta, and the Ionian Islands served as bases for her all-powerful fleet and helped to secure her predominance. The one thing surest to awaken her alarm was any symptom of ambitious designs on the part of her old rival France. She was therefore violently opposed to the French expedition to Algiers, making every effort to prevent it except the actual use of force; in fact she might not have shrunk from this last extremity if she had been more convinced that the enterprise of the French would succeed.¹¹ When it did so and it had become evident that they were in Algeria to stay, she had to reconcile herself to the new situation as best she might, but she saw to it in 1844 that they should not acquire fresh territory by their war with Morocco, and both England and France took care that Spain

¹⁰ The expedition of the Duke of Beaufort to Djidjelli in 1664.

¹¹ The English consul at Algiers prophesied its failure, and the Duke of Wellington seems to have been doubtful of its success. See Darcy, *France et Angleterre: Cent Années de Rivalité Coloniale* (1904), p. 105.

should gain nothing by her hostilities with the same power in 1860. Soon afterwards the digging of the Suez Canal, by deflecting European trade with Australia and the Far East from the Cape route to that of the Mediterranean, added still more to the importance of the Mediterranean and particularly of the Straits in English eyes.

Like most beginnings of modern colonization, the French conquest of Algeria was a curiously haphazard affair. Charles X. and his ministers vacillated many months before they decided to despatch an army to obtain satisfaction for the insults France had received at the hands of the dey. For a while they entertained the marvellous project of letting their friend Mehemet Ali, the pasha of Egypt, avenge their honor for them and pocket the incidental profits. When at last they did decide to act for themselves, although they refused to tie their hands for the future by promises to England, they were quite uncertain as to how far their action should extend and anxious to have it ratified by the powers. Throughout they were thinking less of founding an African empire than of gaining a little military prestige for the Bourbon monarchy, and of giving malcontents in Paris something to talk about besides grievances. In these last objects they failed signally. The success of the Algiers expedition excited no popular enthusiasm in France and availed nothing to prevent the Revolution of 1830. The government of Louis Philippe, however, after some hesitation resolved to keep the conquest made by its predecessor and ultimately to extend it until the whole of Algeria was subdued. A beginning was also made of European colonization, but this came almost to a standstill for a while in the next reign when the emperor Napoleon III. indulged in the dream of a native Arab empire.

In the second half of the nineteenth century the creation of United Italy brought into existence a new Mediterranean power of the first rank. That power had scarcely established itself before it began to turn covetous glances towards the shores of Africa lying so close to its own. The first object of desire was the territory nearest at hand, the weak and tempting regency of Tunis, where there was already a considerable Italian colony. The dream that Rome should again rule over Carthage appealed to patriotic imaginations and seemed not impossible of fulfilment. The chief obstacle in the way was the interests of France. Napoleon III., ever favorable to the sister Latin nations, might possibly have been persuaded to let the Italians have Tunis and the Spaniards Morocco, contenting himself with the possession of Algeria, but the statesmen of the Third Republic proved less sentimental. They realized how much the position of the French in North Africa would be altered

for the worse if instead of rounding out Algeria by taking Tunis for themselves they were to get the Italians on their exposed flank. Rivalry between the two nations was therefore inevitable. In 1878 France was fortunate enough to have England and Germany intimate to her at the Congress of Berlin that they would not oppose her preponderance in Tunis. This action on the part of England, which was in striking contrast to her attitude half a century earlier, may have been due to a desire to prevent French opposition to her own establishment in Cyprus, and also to an unwillingness to see the Italians hold both shores of the narrow Straits of Sicily. As for Germany, Bismarck doubtless cared little which got Tunis, Italy or France. In either case he could count on an estrangement between the two which would be favorable to his policy. Under these circumstances the noisy activity of the Italians in regard to Tunis during the next three years was a fatal blunder, for it roused France to take the step they dreaded most, yet were too weak to forbid. In 1881 the French, with sound reason, if on trumpery pretexts, sent troops into Tunis and reduced it to the position of a protected state. The Italians could only frantically protest and justify Bismarck's calculation by joining Germany and Austria to form the Triple Alliance. They also began to turn their eyes more towards Tripoli, where the Turks had regained control in 1835, a much less tempting prize, but the best thing attainable.

For the next twenty years there was little apparent change of the situation of the European powers as regards North Africa, except that England by her occupation of Egypt in 1885 deepened still further her interest in Mediterranean affairs and entered into a new period of strained relations with France, whose influence in Morocco she actively combated. Gradually, however, with the opening of the twentieth century things took a different turn. Algeria, emerging from the difficulties of its earlier colonial days, was now on the high road to prosperity, and was clearly of the utmost value to France. Tunis had prospered from the first under French rule. France had also acquired immense tropical territories south of the Sahara and had begun to control the desert itself, thus binding together her scattered African possessions into a splendid empire with only the cornerstone lacking, namely Morocco, whose importance to her became more and more evident. Accordingly, under the guidance of M. Delcassé as foreign minister she set about to acquire it by coming to terms with her rivals. In 1904 she settled her outstanding differences with England, abandoning her own historical position and sentimental claims in Egypt in

return for a free hand in Morocco. In another treaty she obtained the same assurance from Italy by a recognition of Italian interest in Tripoli. But Spain also had to be taken into account.

The interest of Spain in her African presidios dwindled down to very small proportions after the evacuation of Oran. She even contemplated abandoning what was left of them. In 1844, however, she anticipated France by a few hours in the seizure of the Zaffarin Islands and her victorious though fruitless war with Morocco again turned the attention of her people to African affairs. Then too the success of the French in subduing Algeria and later in colonizing it, partly by the aid of Spanish settlers, was an impressive object lesson. The fear that France might in time extend her North African conquests further to the westward soon filled the minds of Spaniards with increasing anxiety. They began to proclaim that by right of geography and of history they were the only legitimate heirs to Moroccan territory, that the lands north and south of the Straits ought to be in the possession of one and the same nation as they had been in the days of the Romans and the Arabs. It is a noteworthy fact that whereas in the sixteenth century the greater interest that Spain took in the New World had turned her away from Africa, now at the opening of the twentieth, scarcely had she been deprived of Cuba and the Philippines, the last considerable fragments of her once magnificent colonial empire, than she eagerly entered again upon a policy of African expansion. This was the only goal left for the ambitions of her restless military leaders and of all who still cherished the traditions of Castilian imperialism. In one respect the moment was favorable. The empire of the Sherifs was rapidly disintegrating, but on the other hand Spain had to recognize that instead of being the sole claimant to the succession, she must make what terms she could with a neighbor stronger than herself, namely France. This she succeeded in doing, thanks to English support and to the conciliatory policy of M. Delcassé, but owing to recent events the exact extent of her share of the spoil is still a matter of negotiation.

Thus by the end of 1904, the various European powers holding lands in the Mediterranean had concluded a series of agreements with one another concerning their respective future domains in North Africa. Their projects, however, had yet to be carried out. The sudden intervention of Germany introduced unexpected complications which have more than once in the last few years threatened the world with a great war. Finally, France bought off Germany too by concessions elsewhere, but the international storm-centre passed from Morocco to Tripoli. In the autumn of 1911 the Ital-

ians, weary of waiting for a prize that seemed in no hurry to fall into their lap, excited by the gains of their neighbors, and perhaps alarmed by the thought that the Germans might discover that they had interests here also, determined to delay no longer. Without wasting time in controversy they proceeded to declare war on the Turks and they have, somewhat prematurely, notified the world of their annexation of the Tripolitan territory, rechristening it with the classical name of Lybia.

Before long now, Europe will once more be supreme throughout North Africa, where her domination will be more complete and more extensive than it was in the days of the Roman Empire. Although there are parts of Morocco as unexplored as if they were in the innermost recesses of Asia, and there are oases in Tripoli where no European has been seen for many years, they will soon have their wireless telegraph stations and be accessible to the aeroplane if not to the automobile. Europe has come equipped with all the paraphernalia of western civilization. The resources of modern science will enable her to triumph over material obstacles, tap new sources of wealth, and in spots at least make the desert blossom like the rose. They will not, however, speedily change the spirit of Islam. Under French rule in Algeria the native population has multiplied, and it will multiply elsewhere under the same conditions, and though we may still expect a considerable influx of European colonists into North Africa, the whole of which is now open to them, they are not likely ever to constitute the majority of the inhabitants. This will continue predominantly Berber as it was under the Romans and may resist assimilation to the conquerors as successfully as it did then. Even to-day there is a young Tunisian party as there is a young Egyptian. On the other hand, in Egypt the Europeans are but a handful compared with the natives, in Tunis they are an important element, and though only the minority of them are French, they will all, as will likewise the Jews, contribute to the growth of French influence. Already Africa Minor contains a million Europeans¹² and Algeria is regarded not as a colony but as a prolongation of France, with representatives in the national chambers and its good share of ministers and other high officials.¹³ It is France that in these regions has succeeded to the heritage of Rome. Compared with her Italy and Spain have but meagre portions, and their own emigrant children

¹² Algeria (1911), 795,522; Tunis (1908), 158,293; Morocco (including Spanish possessions), perhaps 30,000; Tripoli (before the war), *ca.* 5,000. These figures include a few natives and part of the Jews.

¹³ For instance, in recent years, Messrs. E. Etienne, G. Thomson, and R. Viviani.

add to her strength. It is France first and foremost that seems called upon to demonstrate whether the European reconquest of North Africa, after more than eleven hundred years of Asiatic dominion, is to be merely a material or also a moral one. Granting that the majority of the people will always be of the primitive native stock, what will be the expression of their civilization, the French of advanced modern thought or the Arabic of the Koran? Time alone can furnish the answer to this fateful question, which is of immeasurable importance to the future of France and thereby of consequence to the whole world.

ARCHIBALD CARY COOLIDGE.